

Waikato Journal of Education 14:2008/2009

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SYLVIA ASHTON-WARNER: AN INTRODUCTION

SUE MIDDLETON

*Department of Policy, Cultural and Social Studies in Education
School of Education, University of Waikato*

Sylvia Warner was born in Stratford, Taranaki, on 17 December 1908. To commemorate the centenary of her birth, Professor Alison Jones and a group of staff of the Faculty of Education at Auckland University ran the *Sylvia Ashton-Warner Centennial Conference*, Epsom Campus. The three papers that follow this introduction originated as presentations at this conference.

The conference (held on August 8-10, 2008) attracted an unusual combination of literary scholars, artists, schoolteachers, academic educationists, and biographers. As in her lifetime, Sylvia's writing continues to trespass across the boundaries of genre: between the literary and the pedagogical, between fiction and theory.

Rarely if ever before Sylvia Ashton-Warner, had schoolteachers been subjects of Hollywood films, television documentaries, or biographical research; and seldom before her, or since, have pedagogical texts been considered worthy objects of literary critique. In his survey of non-fiction in the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Peter Gibbons (1998) included Ashton-Warner's autobiographical writing, as well as Lynley Hood's biographical study of her life and work. But, as recently as 2002, C.K. Stead could see no sign in academic or literary circles "of serious interest in her work – a fact all the more puzzling when considered against the background of 1980s feminism and the determined search in universities for neglected women writers" (2002, p. 15). Alison Jones commented that amongst "dozens of teacher-trainees, teachers, and teacher-educators in Auckland, most had only a vague idea of who she was" (2006, p. 15). So, for the benefit of readers who have not previously encountered Ashton-Warner, a brief background is useful. (For further details see Ashton-Warner, 1980; Hood, 1988).

The years during and after the First World War were difficult for many New Zealand families. Sylvia's father, crippled with an arthritic condition, was unable to provide for the family, so, unusually for the time, her mother supported her husband and ten children by teaching in small, often sole-charge, rural schools. The family moved frequently. Often taught by her authoritarian mother, Sylvia attended ten different primary schools. After secondary school in Masterton, she became a pupil teacher at Wellington South School (1926-1927). While a student at Auckland Teachers' Training College (1928-1929), she met her future husband, fellow student, Keith Henderson. The couple married on August 23, 1931. In their first years of marriage, Keith taught sole-charge schools in Taranaki, and Sylvia gave birth to three children: Jasmine (1935), Elliot (1937), and Ashton (1938).

At Sylvia's suggestion, the couple applied to teach in what was at the time referred to as the "Native School" system (Barrington & Beaglehole, 1974), and they took up their first position in 1938 at Horoera Native School, East Cape, eight miles from the nearest village, Te Araroa. At this time Sylvia experienced what at

the time was described as a severe “nervous breakdown.” Her Wellington “neurologist”, Dr Allen, introduced Sylvia to psychoanalytic theory and encouraged her to write.

In 1941, the family moved to Pipiriki Native School, high up the Whanganui River valley. It was here that Sylvia taught herself the disciplined life of a writer. The diary she kept during those war-time years would later be published as *Myself*. At the end of the war in 1945, the couple moved to another East Coast school at Waioamatani. It was here that Sylvia began publishing short stories (McDonald, 2008). Her first major publications were produced when she was employed at Fernhill School, Omaha, near Hastings (1949-1957), including the first, serialised, New Zealand version of her teaching scheme, published in eight instalments under the name Sylvia (Sylvia, 1956a-g; see also McDonald, 2008; Middleton, 2006). The pen name Sylvia Ashton-Warner appeared for the first time on the first, British (Secker and Warburg) edition of her novel, *Spinster* (Ashton-Warner, 1958).

When Keith was appointed Headmaster of Bethlehem Māori School near Tauranga (Sept. 1957), Sylvia began to work full-time on her writing. She established a relationship with New York publisher, Robert Gottlieb, who published the American version of her teaching scheme in the form of the celebrated book, *Teacher*. The 1960s saw three further novels, *Incense to Idols* (Ashton-Warner, 1960), *Bell Call* (Ashton-Warner, 1960) and *Greenstone* (Ashton-Warner (1967a), and an edited version of her Pipiriki diary, *Myself* (Ashton-Warner, 1967b).

Keith Henderson died on January 7, 1969. From this time, Sylvia embarked on her overseas travels. A period in London with her son and daughter-in-law inspired her final novel, *Three: A Novel*. From 1970 to 1971, she took up an invitation to start a community school at Aspen, Colorado. Her final book about education, *Spearpoint; Teacher in America*, was her account of this experience. In 1972-1973, Sylvia was employed at Vancouver’s Simon Fraser University, where she ran courses on her teaching methods. Here she began work on her award-winning autobiography, *I Passed this Way*.

Sylvia returned to Tauranga, where she completed *I Passed This Way* and advised the production of the film of her life, *Sylvia*. She died in Tauranga on April 27, 1984, before the film was completed.

To educators, Sylvia Ashton-Warner is best known for her “key vocabulary” reading scheme. On the basis of her work with Māori children in remote Native Schools in the post-war years of the 1940s and early 1950s, she argued that literacy was best achieved when children captioned their experiences of fear and sex, the two great (Freudian) drives. The most meaningful words, she argued, were “kiss” (a sex word) and “ghost” (a fear word). Venting the fear/ destructive drive through captions (key vocabulary) and other expressive arts could, she believed, prevent violence and war. This was the theory she elaborated in her novel *Spinster* and her descriptions of her work in *Teacher*.

Today’s school-teachers, teacher-educators and educational researchers can draw on an interesting array of critical engagements with Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s educational ideas. Biographical studies have retraced the twisted paths of Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s own autobiographical narratives (1963, 1967b, 1980), interrogated their historical accuracy, speculated on their psychological

underpinnings, and reviewed her work's reception (Hood, 1988, 1990). American educators, such as Sydney Gurewitz Clemens (1996), have enthusiastically reported on their use of Ashton-Warner's teaching methods. *Provocations*, a recent international collection of chapters by feminist education academics, focussed on theoretical dimensions of Ashton-Warner's life and work (Robertson & McConaghy, 2006) and included three chapters by New Zealanders (Jones, 2006; Middleton, 2006; Moeke-Maxwell, 2006). While overseas commentators have frequently portrayed, as did Sylvia herself, Sylvia Ashton-Warner's educational theories and teaching methods to have been "in confrontation ... with the time and place in which she lived" (Clemens, 1996, p. 26), New Zealand researchers have told a different story that locates Ashton-Warner firmly within the wider progressive education (or "New Education") movement of the 1930s-1950s (McDonald, 2008; Middleton, 2006, 2008).

However, as the following papers make clear, Ashton-Warner's methods are equally applicable in today's classrooms. Marilyn Barlow's paper reports on her Master's thesis research, in which she conducted an experimental study of the effectiveness of a key vocabulary scheme in a contemporary urban school setting. Adrienne Sansom traces depictions of spontaneous dance in Ashton-Warner's classrooms and investigates ways in which her ideas and methods might enhance the 21st century dance curriculum. Trevor Thwaites explores the centrality of music in Ashton-Warner's teaching and how her approach has inspired his own work as a music educator.

REFERENCES

- Ashton-Warner, S. (1958). *Spinster*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Ashton-Warner, S. (1960). *Incense to idols*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Ashton-Warner, S. (1963). *Teacher*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Ashton-Warner, S. (1967a). *Greenstone*. New Zealand: Whitcombe and Tombs.
- Ashton-Warner, S. (1967b). *Myself*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
- Ashton-Warner, S. (1969). *Bell Call*. New Zealand: Whitcombe and Tombs.
- Ashton-Warner, S. (1970). *Three: A novel*. New York: Knopf.
- Ashton-Warner, S. (1972). *Spearpoint; teacher in America*. New York: Knopf.
- Ashton-Warner, S. (1980). *I passed this way*. Wellington, New Zealand: Reed.
- Barrington, J., & Beaglehole, T. (1974). *Māori schools in a changing society*, Wellington: New Zealand: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Clemens, S. (1996). *Pay attention to the children: Lessons for teachers and parents from Sylvia Ashton-Warner*. Napa, CA: Rattle O.K.
- Gibbons, P. (1998). Non-fiction. In T. Sturm, (Ed.), *Oxford history of New Zealand literature in English* (2nd ed.) (pp. 25-104). Auckland: Oxford University Press.
- Hood, L. (1988). *Sylvia! The biography of Sylvia Ashton-Warner*. Auckland, New Zealand: Viking.
- Hood, L. (1990). *Who is Sylvia? The diary of a biography*. Dunedin, New Zealand: John McIndoe.

- Jones, A. (2006). Sex, fear and pedagogy: Sylvia Ashton-Warner's infant room. In J. Robertson & C. McConaghy (Eds.), *Provocations: Sylvia Ashton-Warner and excitability in education* (pp. 15-32). New York: Peter Lang.
- McDonald, G. (2008). *Were Sylvia Ashton-Warner's educational ideas really ignored in New Zealand?: The origins of teacher*. Paper presented at the International Centennial Sylvia Ashton-Warner Conference, Faculty of Education, Auckland University.
- Middleton, S. (2006). "I my own professor": Ashton-Warner as New Zealand educational theorist 1940-1960. In J. Robertson & C. McConaghy (Eds.), *Provocations: Sylvia Ashton-Warner and excitability in education* (pp. 37-55). New York: Peter Lang.
- Middleton, S. (2008). *Sylvia's place: Ashton-Warner as New Zealand educational theorist*. Paper presented at the International Centennial Sylvia Ashton-Warner Conference, Faculty of Education, Auckland University.
- Moeke-Maxwell, T. (2006). InSide/OutSide cultural hybridity: Greenstone as narrative provocateur. In J. Robertson & C. McConaghy (Eds.), *Provocations: Sylvia Ashton-Warner and excitability in education* (pp. 95-117). New York: Peter Lang.
- Robertson, J., & McConaghy, C. (Eds.). (2006). *Provocations: Sylvia Ashton-Warner and excitability in education*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Stead, C. K. (2002). *Kin of place*. Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press.
- Sylvia (1956a, February 1). Private key vocabularies. *National Education*, 407, pp. 10-12.
- Sylvia (1956b, March 1). Organic writing. *National Education*, 408, 54-55.
- Sylvia (1956c, April 3). Organic reading. *National Education*, 409, 97-98.
- Sylvia (1956d, May 1). Organic reading is not new. *National Education*, 410, 141.
- Sylvia (1956e, August 1). The golden section. *National Education*, 413, 248-251.
- Sylvia (1956f, September 3). The unlived life. *National Education*, 414, 294-295.
- Sylvia (1956g, October 1). Tone. *National Education*, 415, 342-3.

Copyright of Waikato Journal of Education is the property of Waikato Journal of Education and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.